

# THE MIDLAND

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## SHERWOOD ANDERSON, THE WISTFULLY FAITHFUL

By NELSON ANTRIM CRAWFORD

The first time I ever heard of Sherwood Anderson was in December, 1915, when in a copy of *The Little Review* I found a sketch of his entitled *Sister*. The story impressed me. It is not so significant a story as some of Anderson's later work, but that was seven years ago and in that particular seven years American fiction, with Anderson always among the leaders, has gone far.

*Sister* deals with a young woman artist. The author says: "She is my sister, but long ago she has forgotten that and I have forgotten." The only significant incident in the story is the whipping of the girl by her father because she had announced to the family that she was about to take a lover. The incident serves merely to focus the symbolism of the story, which is subsequently expressed thus:

"I am the world and my sister is the young artist in the world. I am afraid the world will destroy her. So furious is my love for her that the touch of her hand makes me tremble."

The entire sketch does not contain more than a thousand words. It shows, in embryo, however, the three factors that have made Anderson's work the most significant contribution to contemporary American literature.

One of these factors is style. In this story, as in his later works, the reader feels as if the author were sitting across the table from him telling the story, not simply and directly as textbooks on story writing assume is the natural method, but with inversions, with steps to and fro, with divagations from the main tale, following up the associations of a person, a name, or a word. This is the way people actually think and feel. This is the natural way to tell a story. Anderson is one of the few living writers who can use this method.

In the second place, there is manifest in this early work of his a keen feeling for the tragedy of current American life — a tragedy chiefly of frustration. This is a tragedy of youth, individual and national. In a recent book, *On English Poetry*, Robert Graves talks about the "temporary writing of poetry by normal single-track minds," which he says "is most common in youth when the sudden realization of sex, its powers and its limited opportunities for satisfactory expression, turns the world upside down for any sensitive boy or girl." The artist has his art — poetry, or something else — for sublimation, but what of the great number of sensitive young men and women who, instead of talent, have inhibitions? In this our civilization, they are destined for repression and frustration, such as will destroy, or reduce to conventional debauchery, physical or spiritual, the possibilities of keen joy. It is with these folk that Anderson, from the beginning, has been concerned.

Finally, *Sister* shows the mystical symbolic quality which is destined to appear in all of Anderson's work, though subsequently it is much more closely blended with the other qualities of his work. *Sister* obviously goes beyond symbolism into emphatic allegory — an error which Anderson does not again make. Symbolism gives to his later work much of its distinctiveness.

But who is this Anderson who, in seven years, has moved from the pages of a small (though significant)

literary magazine, to the position of certainly the most promising and original, if not the greatest, American writer of fiction? Whence comes he and what manner of man is he? Moreover, for what Lord is he a prophet in the wilderness of American industrialism? For whom would he make straight a highway in the desert?

Sherwood Anderson was born in a little town in southwestern Ohio — Cemden by name — in 1876. He got no early education to speak of, but he had a heritage of talent, probably from his mother, to whom he dedicates *Winesburg, Ohio* with the statement that her "keen observations on the life about her first awoke in me the hunger to see beneath the surface of lives." Two of his brothers became painters. Anderson worked at odd jobs and eventually drifted to Chicago. He was working in a warehouse there when the Spanish-American war broke out and he enlisted. He went to Cuba, but when he was demobilized he was not content to go back to his old way of life. He went to Springfield, Ohio, and entered Wittenberg College as a special student, doing odd jobs to support himself. He stayed there a year or two, then returned to Chicago and entered the advertising business. First he was an advertising solicitor, and later both a solicitor and a copy-writer. He has the reputation of being one of the best mail order copy-writers in America.

Anderson began writing for an advertising journal published by the firm with which he was connected. He prepared a series of short articles on types of business men. These articles, published years ago, attracted the attention of Cyrus Curtis, who was enough interested in them to call at the office of the agency for the purpose of meeting Mr. Anderson.

In 1906 Mr. Anderson became advertising manager of a mail order concern in Cleveland. The following year he went into business for himself in Elyria, Ohio, and divided his time between writing and trying to put a business on its feet. His health and his business both

failed — his health only temporarily. He went back to the agency business in Chicago, and ever since that time has used advertising as a means of making a living. His practice has been to do advertising until he got a bit ahead financially, then to turn to writing and devote his sole attention to it for a time. Much of Anderson's writing, nevertheless, has been done in odd moments while he was waiting in hotels, railway stations, and offices in connection with his business.

It is obvious that there was a long period of preparation for the novels, tales, and poems, which most of us know as Sherwood Anderson's work. He himself says he burned a great quantity of writing even before he wrote *Sister*. His first book was published when he was 40 years of age — a striking contrast to many writers of the day, but an interesting confirmation of Carl Sandburg's theory that no writer does significant work before the age of forty. Mr. Anderson's explanation of the genesis of his writing is, as he himself comments, "outwardly at least, a simple matter." He says in a letter:

"I was a business man and got sick of it, and went into writing, not to make a success, but to give myself an interest in life.

"Probably I always was, in my outlook on life, an artist, loving the color of things, words, arrangements of words and ideas. I might, I suppose, have been a painter, as I can get excitement and interest out of that too."

Back of this there is, of course, a complexity which is not outward. There is Mr. Anderson's Mid-Western inheritance. There is his bringing up in Ohio, where modern industrialism had not quite overcome the older pride of trade and individual self-sufficiency and where the clouds of religious controversy between strange fanatical puritan sects still hung heavily over the country and the small towns. There was his own actual industrial and business experience. As a lad Anderson roved from job to job. As a man he was closely in touch with the executives of business of all sorts, for to such men no one gets

closer than does the advertising agent. Add to these the mystical qualities which are to some extent found in every artist, but which are far more conspicuous in Anderson than in most, and you have some conception of the foundation on which his work rests. From these developed the complexes which betoken the artist and which appear in the writing as the realities of which the outward tendencies were merely symbols.

Anderson knows what he calls Mid-America, but he also knows humanity. Indeed, I am inclined to think that Mid-America is a symbol of the world. Probably something of this sort is true of any great writer, but it seems to me unusually evident in Anderson's work. One feels that the author himself is not an objective observer, but a subjective part of the life with which he deals. I am not sure but that he himself is Mid-America and the world. There is a pertinence to James Oppenheim's line, "He who bares self bares humanity."

Anderson's first two novels, *Windy McPherson's Son*, published in 1916, and *Marching Men*, published in 1917, do not impress me as much as that first little sketch of his that I read. They are scarcely authentic prophecies of his genius. They have understanding, tenderness, beauty, but they seem in a way to partake, unintentionally and not altogether artistically, of the futility of the characters with which they deal.

*Marching Men* has a poetic, and to a certain extent, an apocalyptic quality. In it is the vision of revolution:

"All over the city McGregor talked of old Labour and how he was to be built up and put before men's eyes by the movement of the Marching Men. How our legs tingled to fall in step and go marching away with him.

"And all over the country men were getting the idea — the Marching Men — old Labour in one mass marching before the eyes of men — old Labour that was going to make the world see — see and feel its bigness at last. Men were to come to the end of strife — men united — Marching! Marching! Marching!"

Yet at the end of the book David says, "What if after all this McGregor and his woman knew both roads? What if they, after looking deliberately along the road toward success in life, went without regret along the road to failure? What if McGregor and not myself knew the road to beauty?"

The fact that these are not great novels has nothing much to do with Anderson's genius. It is simply a fact. We get to thinking that if one is to be a great writer one must achieve greatness in certain conventional forms. Here in America our main idea is that he must achieve it in the novel, and yet the novel is not a very old form of writing, and there is serious question whether it is by any means a permanent form. Certainly, if it is to last, it must take on a new meaning and power. In addition to giving the novel a new meaning and power, however, there is need for the creation of new forms. Anderson's novels are steps on the way to the creation of such forms. It is in that respect that they are particularly interesting.

These novels belong to Anderson's revolutionary period. In both *Windy McPherson's Son* and *Marching Men* the author seems to dream of some revolution — revolution for the sake of beauty — arising from the mass of men, starting here in the Middle West, where crudity and rawness prevail, but where there is nevertheless room for faith in humanity in the mass.

*Mid-American Chants*, his only volume of verse, marks a change in Anderson. He still writes:

"Crush and trample, brother, brother — crush and trample 'til  
you die.

Do not hold thy hand from strangling — crush and trample 'til  
you die."

But no longer does he look for a physical revolution even as a symbol. "Not the shouting and the waving of flags, but something else creeps into me," he writes. "You see, dear brothers of the world, I dream of new and more subtle loves for me and my men." Love, maturity,

beauty, and song are the principal factors in the change toward which the author is looking. In the foreword of this book Mr. Anderson says:

"I do not believe that we people of mid-western America, immersed as we are in affairs, hurried and harried through life by the terrible engine — industrialism — have come to the time of song. To me it seems that song belongs with and has its birth in the memory of older things than we know. In the beaten paths of life, when many generations of men have walked the streets of a city or wandered at night in the hills of an old land, the singer arises.

"The singer is neither young nor old but within him always there is something that is very old. The flavor of many lives and of many gone weary to the end of life creeps into his voice. Words run out beyond the power of words. There is unworldly beauty in the song of him who sings out of the souls of peoples of old times and places but that beauty does not yet belong to us.

"In Middle America men are awakening. Like awkward and untrained boys we begin to turn toward maturity and with our awakening we hunger for song. But in our towns and fields there are few memory-haunted places. Here we stand in roaring city streets, on steaming coal heaps, in the shadow of factories from which come only the grinding roar of machines. We do not sing but mutter in the darkness. Our lips are cracked with dust and with the heat of furnaces. We but mutter and feel our way toward the promise of song.

"For this book of chants I ask only that it be allowed to stand stark against the background of my own place and generation. Honest Americans will not demand beauty — this is not yet native to our cities and fields. In secret a million men and women are trying, as I have tried here, to express the hunger within and I have dared to put these chants forth only because I hope and believe they may find an answering and clearer call in the hearts of other Mid-Americans."

The pathos of life in America, as Mr. Anderson sees it, is that so many men become embittered and ugly. The school teacher in the Ohio town, the farmer in his field, the stenographer in the city, and the 100 per cent American, the "go-getter," are alike childish and immature.



They are ashamed to strive for life and beauty. They are constantly inhibited. They live in a place walled in by conventional business, social relations, economic conditions, and religion, and in many cases never see the light.

This point of view is clearly manifest in *Winesburg, Ohio*, between which and the *Spoon River Anthology* must lie, in my estimation, the honor of being the most significant book in American literature since *Leaves of Grass*. The characters in this book are of the sort one might meet every day in any small town, though they are essentially individuals rather than types. To the average observer, met casually they would seem normal people. Anderson sees beneath the surface, however, and brings to view the strange psychopathies of these people. They do not understand themselves and they are not understood by their neighbors. Most of them are, in fact, grotesques of the kind portrayed in the first tale in the book:

"In the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful.

"The old man had listed hundreds of the truths in his book. I will not try to tell you of all of them. There was the truth of virginity and the truth of passion, the truth of wealth and of poverty, of thrift and of profligacy, of carelessness and abandon. Hundreds and hundreds of truths and they were all beautiful.

"And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them.

"It was the truths that made the people grotesque. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood."



*Winesburg, Ohio* is a spare and simple but deep-sighted picture of American life, showing its crudity and at the same time its ashamed, inhibited longing for beauty. Here and there, unfortunately, is a tendency to preach — the propagandist of Anderson's earlier work creeping through. In writing of Helen White, and George Willard, for instance, the author says: "For some reason that could not be explained they had both got from their silent evening together the thing needed. Man or boy, woman or girl, they had for a moment taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible."

Anderson's most recently published novel, *Poor White*, is bigger than either of his previous novels. A larger theme is painted upon a larger canvas. At the same time, it is distinctively realistic. There is present an even keener longing for beauty — or, perhaps better, beauty and freedom, if the two can be separated. There is not a little propaganda in *Poor White*. Beauty and freedom, the author shows, are being steadily lost in the mechanics of industrial life, though at the end of the book there is no lack of hope. A rereading of the work reminds me strongly of a recent poem by J. E. Spingarn:

I have loved freedom more than anything else;  
And freedom fades — I see her everywhere dying;  
Her troops are scattered and her army melts —  
On every hill-top the enemy's flag is flying.

But still she does not die; insoluble man,  
Haunting her empty temples, hollow-eyed,  
Still hears the echo of her ancient ban;  
"Whoever thinks I am dead, himself has died."

In *The Triumph of the Egg*, Anderson's latest collection of tales, the author shows greater facility and greater variety in selection of material than in *Winesburg, Ohio*, but hardly greater poignancy. And yet when I read a tale like *I Want to Know Why* or *Out of Nowhere*

into *Nothing*, I wonder if there is any greater poignancy utterly free from sentimental clap-trap, anywhere in American literature. There is even poignancy of humor in this book — a step in advance of *Winesburg, Ohio*. I was surprised at the effectiveness of this upon an audience of ordinary Middle Western folk when *The Egg* was read aloud to them.

In this book Anderson appears to feel the futility and inhibitions with which his characters are afflicted as parts of himself. He seems to himself to be futile and inhibited. It is this, for one thing, that makes his stories so effective. Perfect facility and fluency would never do in dealing with the characters and the themes with which he deals. What is to many writers a disadvantage is to Anderson a conspicuous advantage. He is both an observer of the life with which he deals and a part of it.

I am a helpless man — my hands tremble.

I feel in the darkness but cannot find the doorknob.

I look out at a window.

Many tales are dying in the street before the house of my mind.

No understanding of Sherwood Anderson would be complete without consideration of *A New Testament* which so far has had only the limited circulation of *The Little Review*. I know of nothing that is quite like it. It is Anderson himself, revealing himself as no American except Whitman has ever revealed himself before. The only way to describe *A New Testament* is to quote from it:

"It would be absurd for me to try writing of myself and then solemnly to put my writings into print, I am too much occupied with myself to do the thing well. I am like you in that regard. Although I think of myself all the time I cannot bring myself to the conviction that there is anything of importance attached to the life led by my conscious self. What I want to say is this:— men may talk to me until they are blind of the life force and of the soul that liveth beyond the passing away of the husk called the body —

"For me life centres in myself, in the hidden thing in myself. I am sorry my flesh is not more beautiful, that I cannot live happily in contemplation of myself and must of necessity turn inward to discover what is interesting in the marking of me. It would simplify things if I could love my outward self and it must be the same with you."

"The female words have found no lovers.

They are barren.

It was not God's wish that it be so.

I am one who would serve God.

Have not my brothers the male words been castrated and made into eunuchs?

"I would be nurse to many distorted words.

I would make my book a hospital for crippled words."

"In a plow factory, on the West Side in Chicago, there are great tanks in the floor. The tanks are kept filled with many colored fluids. By machinery plows are lifted from the factory floor and swung above the tanks. They are dipped and become instantly and completely black, red, brown, purple, grey, pink.

"Can a plow be pink? I have the trick of thinking too rapidly in color. I cannot remember the color of the eyes of my sister. The color of the cheeks of my mistress I cannot remember.

"An endless clanking goes on in my head. It is the machinery of the life in which I hang suspended. I and all the men and women in the streets are at this moment being dipped anew in the life of Chicago. There is no yesterday for any of us. We hang by the hook in the present. Whatever lies behind this second of conscious time is a lie and I have set myself to lie to the limit. By my lying and by that road only will I succeed in expressing something of the truth of the life into which I also have been flung.

"This is evidently true. Plows may not be pink but the prevailing color of the flesh of people is pink. We have all been dipped into a dawn."

"You are mistaken in thinking I will only exist for a certain number of years. I do not exist at all. I shall exist forever.

"Once I thought that by making love to women I could come at truth. Now I make love to women as the wings of an insect fleck the waters of a stream.

"Truth lies far out in the field of fancy, in the forest of doubt."

"I have conceived of life as a bowl into which I am cast. If the outer world is inhabited by gods, as I choose to believe it is, it is because I am minute and you minute.

"I cannot keep my footing on the side of the bowl of life. There is, however, no humbleness in me. I constantly strive to reach out. It is that makes me seem strange in your sight. If you have heard my voice, laughing at the bottom of the bowl, it is because I have an ambition to be a flea in God's ear. I have wished to set up a roaring in God's head. I have wished to roar of men, women, and children I have seen walking in the valley of a river. I have wished to remind God of my love of my fellows.

"That last statement I fear is a lie. I am not concerned with the fate of my fellows. If you think I am you are mistaken about me."

The incidents in *A New Testament* may or may not be actual experiences. Probably some of them are and some are not. But they are all psychological experiences, and the psychological experiences of a writer are more significant, more revealing, than his physical experiences.

One inevitably looks for greater achievements in the future than Anderson has yet made. Notwithstanding the point that he has now reached, it is impossible not to feel that his most significant contributions to American letters are yet to come. He is now the clearest sighted, deepest visioned interpreter of the Middle West, not merely to those outside the region, but to us within it, even to himself. There is in him utter faithfulness. Moreover, it is a wistful faithfulness. From such a rock streams innumerable and immeasurable may flow.

## THE ENORMOUS ROOM: A REVIEW

By GEORGE CARVER

On all sides one hears the criticism that the young generation is lacking in respect for authority of all kinds, from that of Moses to that of Beatrice Fairfax, from Saint Paul to Dr. Frank Crane. In fact, no less a personage than Guglielmo Ferrero, the Italian historian and publicist, bases the present state of affairs entirely upon this same disrespect.

We can do no better, perhaps, than to fall in line and accept as axiomatic the idea, then, that youth does not respect authority. And having done so, continue by asking Why should it?

It began to be remarked when Liberty Bonds were first put on the market that more people than ever before were learning to make use of the bond as a means of investing savings. It might also have been said at the same time that more people than ever before were learning to use their minds as a means of coming to conclusions. This does not mean in any sense that they learned to think correctly, but rather that tens of thousands whose ideas never varied from the routine of everyday acquisitiveness began suddenly to harbor abstractions. For instance, prior to 1914 the word "billion" stood, in the mind of the naive man, merely for a number beyond the grasp of intelligence to conceive. It, however, rapidly came to assume definiteness for him and he used it as an ordinary handle for moving men and money around in his conversation. Furthermore, for the first time many, many thousands learned something of geography. Not many months before the war a woman asked me whether South America was a Mexican state or a part of the United States. About a year later she became more than mildly excited concerning the pronunciation of "Przemysl." Again, many people who in thought never

ventured beyond the confines of "disease, domestics, descendants, and dress" commenced to gesture in terms of ethnography. Minds expanded not in isolated quarters as is to be expected, but generally and to a degree hitherto unknown. The war was a sort of yeast at work in a well ground flour.

But this thought awakening was not new; it was merely more widespread. The same sort of thing happened in Europe in the fourteenth century, in the fifteenth century, and again in the eighteenth. Only, where tens were capable of reacting to the influences of the Fall of Constantinople and to the Discovery of America, and hundreds to the French Revolution, thousands responded to the stimulus of the Great War. And the effects have always been the same, during the Renaissance, after the Discovery of America, after the French Revolution. The yeast fermented wildly and the dough ran over the side of the bowl; it took a long time for it to be kneaded down into shape for loaves and still longer for the baking to render the loaves edible — the hands of many authorities were required for the kneading. But the thing was done. Just as it will be done in the case of to-day. The kneading and baking will necessarily take more time, for the yeast has never been so powerful, or the hands dirtier, or the oven slower. But bread will finally come forth, more nourishing than any yet produced. For in the process many hands will be examined — only the cleanest and most deft will be used.

And this examination of hands is what we are now engaged upon. The dough is all over the kitchen. Many hands have tried to save it and have besmirched it marvelously. In the end, however, the outside can be scraped off and the remainder baked. Whose will be the hands for the undertaking?

They must come hereafter. In the meantime we must proceed with the examination, blundering here and failing there. And it is this examination which so disturbs

the fathers, for it is their hands that are being examined. Naturally they object; hence the conflict and hence, also, the ultimate good. For good must come always through conflict.

All this is no more than to say that where so many have learned to be intellectually curious there is bound to be much error. That is true, but there is always bound to be some little truth. And it is this truth that we want to save. Let the saving be wrought how it may.

Some of those just now who are busiest examining hands are novelists. And almost to a man they are intent upon one kind of smirch—stupidity. Time was when novelists fought wrong and upheld right. Now they go deeper and attack the cause of wrong—stupidity. One has only to look about him for the evidence. Mr. Norris's *Brass*, Mr. Fuessle's *Gold Shod*, Mr. Hecht's *Erik Dorn*, Mr. Hergesheimer's *Cytherea*, these are but four of the many.

Perhaps one of the most startling of these expositions of stupidity was Mr. Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*, but not more startling is it, however, than *The Enormous Room* by Mr. E. E. Cummings.

This book is an account of the events that led up to the author's imprisonment in La Ferté Macé. Then it describes the outstanding features of that imprisonment. The method used is not wholly dissimilar to that used by Dostoievski in *The House of the Dead*. But the style is like nothing under the sun. Nonetheless, both method and style enable the writer to portray what he has to say as well as tell about it.

Perhaps it is this portrayal of events and men and mental states that makes the book an achievement, although a mere recital of them would make an indelible impression. By vocabulary, however, by sentence twist, and by epithet, happening is realized, men are made to walk abroad and talk, and mental state is wrought that writhes and squirms and pulses almost to unreason.



Besides this, however, the effect of the book is stressed by the writer's attitude toward his suffering. *Three Soldiers*, one remembers, was a writing about the war that fairly screamed with bitterness. *The Enormous Room*, however, is altogether different. One missed in *Three Soldiers* that gayety which in the army was what enabled most of us to return with some slight degree of wholesomeness at least. Mr. Cummings includes gayety, and thereby magnifies the torment immeasurably. For through this gayety is apparent a clean saneness that can do no less than carry conviction.

To be gay under such circumstances as this book describes is to be a chosen mortal. For instance, Mr. Cummings went to France early in the war to drive an ambulance. His friend in the corps, from whom he was inseparable, wrote some letters which the French censor conceived to be treasonable. The friend was arrested. The author was also arrested and for no other reason than that he was intimate with the letter-writer. First in one prison and then another the two young men were carcered, though always alone. Finally both were put into "the enormous room", a sort of detention station where the scum of three continents was dumped. In the end the friend was removed to prison for the duration of the war but was finally released, for the charges against him were ridiculous, and Cummings was sent home. In spite of all this, however, gayety permeates the book to a degree that is, as I say, palpably contributory to the author's final effect.

Besides this element toward conviction, the fact that the work is artistic in design enhances its impression. The material is such that it might well be used in a government report of prison conditions. But Mr. Cummings is essentially the artist. For some time he has contributed verse and line drawings to the "Dial". Beyond doubt his training in verse is responsible for the smack of his phrases as undoubtedly his training with the pencil

aided him in discovering that detail in whatever he described that set it apart from every other object of its kind in the world — which after all is one of the chief secrets of the writing art.

The book is an arraignment of war, just as *Three Soldiers* was. But more than being an arraignment of war, it is an arraignment of the stupidity that leads to war and is the eternal concomitant of it. And, when all is said and done, why should he not make such arraignment? But war is an effect brought about by authority in control of the thought of a nation; therefore to attack it is to rebel against authority: hence youth is recalcitrant. Which suggests a curious idea. Suppose all those who had any hand in the war were to be suddenly endowed with the gift of expression sufficient for the setting down of their individual reactions to it. Would, then, the majority of those who read, say, half a dozen of these reports be prone to think of war in terms of honor or of stupidity, in terms of brass bands or of latrines?

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## FOUR POEMS

By GWENDOLEN HASTE

### EVENING

Cups of shadow  
Deep in sagebrush hollows.  
Waves of shadow  
Breaking on velvet thrust of cliff.  
Black lacquer pine trees  
Flat  
On a sky of pale smooth brass.

## THE FLEET

The hollyhocks tilt in the high wind  
Slim masts  
Carrying sails  
Of silken crimson.  
At night they slip their anchors  
And slide stealthily  
Over the prairies,  
Riding the restless sagebrush seas,  
Setting their course  
By misty valley  
And moon-washed butte,  
Bound for far harbors  
Locked within dim mountains,  
Lit by lonely stars.

## AGE

The old ranch house  
Leans  
With fallen door  
And ragged windows.  
Russian thistles crowd the steps  
While grackles chuff and bicker  
Through the empty rooms.

Young pioneers  
Raze it with vigorous strong arms;  
Build again  
With hard white boards  
And shining paint.  
Uproot the thistles  
And fly the flag of smoke —  
This is no land for ghosts!

## THE RIMROCK ROAD

The car speeds over the dipping road.  
It rushes up the slopes,  
And swoops into the hollows.

We catch our breath  
And laugh.

We fill the air with our high chatter.  
But beside us  
Towers the rimrock,  
Black in the night,  
Fretted with snow,  
Following steadily our rushing course,  
Eternal,  
Implacable,  
Austere.

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## JOHN G. NEIHARDT AND HIS WORK

By FRANK LUTHER MOTT

When it comes to democracy, preaching is one thing and practice is another. Perhaps the practice of democracy to any considerable extent would be too unpleasant, too disturbing, ever to become a fashion, but preaching about it has long been, throughout America, one of our favorite indoor sports. Of course, there are many things we like to read about that we should not like to practice, like shipwreck on a desert island, or passing through a typhoon. It is great fun to read Defoe or Cowper, Conrad or Masfield, but may the saints preserve us from the actuality of the experiences we vicariously enjoy. Which brings me to an observation that John G. Neihardt made one day as we sat out under a tree in front of his little cottage in Bancroft, Nebraska.

"You and I," he said, "would have got along all right among the fur-trading democracy of my poems — made up of rough hunters, Indians and soldiers though it was. We are physically and mentally fit; we'd have made our way."

But I don't know. One could believe it of Neihardt; one could believe almost anything of that extraordinary

fellow. But most of us do not long for a return of the primitive conditions of society exemplified by the frontier fort and trading post in the Nebraska of a hundred years ago. Think of the famous crawl of old Hugh Glass. He *crawled* one hundred miles through the uninhabited prairie of Nebraska dragging a shattered leg behind him. Think of the rough doings of those three friends, Carpenter, Fink and Talbeau, double-fisted old heroes that they were: how many of us could have stood up among them?

But whether the practice of democracy is inviting or not, there can be no doubt that Mr. Neihardt's account of democracy is exceedingly inviting. Thus has preaching the better of practicing. Neihardt is more than inviting: he is absorbingly interesting; and one cannot doubt that much of the appeal comes from the fact that the reader sees in Glass, Carpenter, Fink and Talbeau qualities that are at least potentially his own. He cannot but admire that democratic society, and exercising the undisputed privilege of every reader, he imagines himself the hero of every tale. "The Song of Hugh Glass" is, constructively, his own autobiography, and in imagination he fits admirably into primitive democratic conditions.

In the first two poems of his epic cycle of the West, Mr. Neihardt has portrayed a thoroughly democratic society. There were no artificial distinctions. A man stood or fell by his own merits, and weaklings perished, or returned to the eastern cities where there were niches for them. Manly qualities counted — of brain, heart and mind — and one family tree as good as another.

To make heroes more or less democratic is nothing new in American literature; that is the usual course. But Mr. Neihardt's originality consists in the fact that he is creating epic heroes, and his epic heroes are democratic. That is something new in any literature. Epic heroes have been men set apart. They have not been of the self-same dust as we; they have been demigods or archfiends or legendary supermen of one sort or another. Indeed,

students of poetics have come to look upon the agency of the superhuman as a necessary element in epic poetry. This dogma Neihardt rejects. His heroes are real men — men of a heroic time, to be sure, but of an indubitable actuality. They speak fine, idiomatic English, and they are as honest and true as the prairies themselves.

Undoubtedly it is a daring project to which Mr. Neihardt is devoting his life and genius. To abandon much of the recognized epic machinery without so much as an apology, to use real men from historical narratives and actual exploits from almost unknown American sources, to induce the epic mood and at the same time to maintain a nearness to matters of fact — to do these things is a feat calling for the highest powers. Those of us who believe in him think Neihardt possesses the highest powers, and we point to his accomplishment thus far. The recognition he has received from critics already is most encouraging. "The most extraordinary, the most original, the most striking thing in American poetry," wrote William Stanley Braithwaite of "The Song of Hugh Glass."

But the epic cycle is scarcely half done and only two of its projected five books have been published, so that, after all, Mr. Neihardt's reputation as an epic poet is for tomorrow rather than today. Neihardt himself is not impatient. He has an unwavering and most impersonal faith in his ability to accomplish his big task. The action of the Poetry Society of America in awarding to his "Song of the Three Friends" its prize for the best poem published in 1919 certainly helped his work to a measure of the popular recognition which it highly deserves. He need not be impatient. Just past forty, he is at the height of his power, and doing his most successful work.

John Griesenau Neihardt was born near Sharpsburg, Illinois, but spent most of his boyhood in Wayne, Nebraska. At Wayne is located the Nebraska Normal School — one of the small colleges that dot the Middle West and wield such a large influence on that section.

The Neihardts were too poor to pay the son's tuition, but the president of the college, after the fashion of presidents of small schools, took an interest in the promising lad and found him a job ringing the college bell. By such means young Neihardt finished the teachers' course and got his diploma. But he was destined not to be a teacher; he was foreordained to a devotion to the Muses.

In 1900 the family moved to Bancroft, Nebraska. Young Neihardt was already a poet, with dreams and ideals and fire. The townsfolk did not understand him. He used to come home across lots and up alleys to avoid meeting neighbors who laughed at him because they could not understand him. Some years later he wrote a poem called "The Poet's Town", which may be taken to be largely autobiographical. Here are but a few lines from it: they will give a hint of the young poet's thought life:

Sipper of ancient flagons,  
Often the lonesome boy  
Saw in the farmers' wagons  
The chariots hurled at Troy:

Trundling in dust and thunder  
They rumbled up and down,  
Laden with princely plunder,  
Loot of the tragic town.

And once when the rich man's daughter  
Smiled on the boy at play,  
Sword-storms, giddy with slaughter,  
Swept back the ancient day.

War steeds shrieked in the quiet,  
Far and hoarse were the cries;  
And oh, through the din and the riot —  
The music of Helen's eyes!

Stabbed with the olden sorrow,  
He slunk away from the play,  
For the Past and the vast Tomorrow  
Were wedded in his Today.



Bancroft was a trading post for the Omaha Indians, who had a reservation nearby. Young Neihardt got a job as assistant to the Indian agent at Bancroft, and for several years was in intimate association with the red man. Out of this experience grew his short stories dealing with the Indians. These stories were successful, and Neihardt saw his path as a short story writer lying smooth and easy before him. He was getting his five cents a word for all he could write, and an insistent demand lured him to short fiction as a life work, when he decided to give it all up.

Mr. Neihardt's first published poem appeared in the *Youth's Companion* in 1900, and he continued thereafter constantly writing lyrics and plays and experimenting with various literary forms. He tried his 'prentice hand on two "epics" of a thousand lines each, but his "Divine Enchantment" was the first poem he published in book form. It is in blank verse and Spenserian stanza, and shows a broad sweep of imagination and good versification, but Mr. Neihardt, regarding it as unworthy juvenilia, has destroyed every copy he could lay his hands on. His later volumes of lyrics, "A Bundle of Myrrh", "Man-Song", and "The Stranger at the Gate" won him a large following among readers and critics. Collected in the volume, "The Quest", his best lyrics place Neihardt high among contemporary English and American poets. The *Bookman's* praise of his "extraordinary powers" and the dictum of the *Times Book Review* that certain of his lyrics "have not been equalled by any modern poet" indicate the place Neihardt had achieved with the lyric. But he gave up the lyric when he gave up the short story.

He gave them both up in order that he might devote himself unreservedly to a great task which he had set himself. For several years the realization had been growing upon him that the advance of the white race to the Pacific slope, with the stories of individual heroism that are a part of that advance, furnished materials from

which a great American epic might be written. In 1908 he made a trip from the headwaters of the Missouri down the river for a thousand miles in an open boat, to get a glimpse of the setting he had in mind for his great work. The idea grew upon him until it mastered him, and from that day to this, the task upon which he is engaged has been everything, and John Neihardt and his personal fortunes, even his family and his own fame, have been little considered. He has an extraordinarily impersonal view of the work upon which he is engaged; never was there more complete dedication to an artistic purpose. Mr. Neihardt not infrequently makes remarks which betray his thought of the imminence of death, and it is easy to see that his only fear for the epic is that another hand than his may cut it short. *Ars longa; vita brevis.*

Certainly the epic, in scope and plan, is well worthy his devotion or that of any other poet. Like most epic writing, it is concerned with the westward movement of the van of a great civilization. The basis of the narratives is the epic mood engendered — a mood that suffuses the work with the feeling of heroic attitude and deed. The setting is the prairie, than which the Aegean Sea or any Miltonic sea or plain is not more epical. The characters are the hardy fighters and hunters whose exploits single-handed against mighty odds are the "stark saga stuff" of which epics are made. The historical and social significance of the whole is tremendous.

There are to be five books, of which "The Song of Three Friends", the prize volume, will be first in order, and "The Song of Hugh Glass" second. These poems take us up the Missouri with the bands out of which all the great western explorers came. Third will be "The Song of Jed Smith," which will follow the epic movement through to the Pacific Ocean and the Spanish settlements of Southern California. The fourth poem will be "The Song of the Mormons," which will serve to represent the period of the homeseekers. Mr. Neihardt has chosen this episode of the migration because it falls naturally into a

rounded art-form, whereas most of the migration was unorganized, go-as-you-please, individualistic. The last poem of the series, "The Song of the Indian Wars," upon which Mr. Neihardt is now engaged, will be the story of the vanquishment of the Indian. It is a climactic, tragical story, and its appearance, probably next year, is awaited with impatience.

It may be noted that the series falls into a natural thematic progression from individual exploits, through the adventures of small groups, then of larger groups, and finally to the great contest and the victory of the pioneers. The series is plotted according to the social evolution of the era.

And so John Neihardt lives in his house with the big vegetable garden behind it, and builds his epic. He gardens assiduously, and does some reviewing for the *Minneapolis Journal*, and each winter he makes a little lecture-recital tour, visiting universities principally, and made brief, for the sake of the epic. But, you see, even poets, or poets' families, cannot live on heroic dreams. Gardening, however, is not incompatible with poetry, and one cannot doubt that as a gardener Neihardt emulates his own

"Sowers planting vision  
And reapers gleaning awe,"

while as for his reviewing, it serves to keep him in touch with the thought and progress of the world. I do not think there is any longing after the fleshpots in the cottage, or any thoughts of easy money for short stories and such-like. Mrs. Neihardt is a very talented woman and shares all her husband's faith, enthusiasm and philosophy. The poet's mother, too, a delightful, neighborly woman, knows that whatever John decides is for the best. When Mr. Neihardt a year or two ago told me of his thought of removing from the Bancroft home to the Ozark regions in search of a simpler and cheaper way of living, I asked his mother if she wanted to go to the Ozarks too, for I knew of her many friendships in Bancroft.

"I want to be with John," was her only reply.

So finally the Neihardts left the Nebraska village for Branson, Missouri, and are now at home in a charming place one of the chief features of which is a wide view of a beautiful Ozark landscape. It is a far more prepossessing location than the village which was so long their home. Bancroft has been an Indian post, as I have said, but from even such a measure of prosperity it has been cut off. One of the first things I asked Mr. Neihardt when I visited him there was, "Why do you live here?" His reply was, "I might as well do my work here as anywhere." The work's the thing. You can't talk long to John Neihardt without understanding that the epic is master thereabouts and Neihardt the servant.

The mood of his epic Mr. Neihardt regards as fundamental. Every line he writes is designed to fit in with the epic mood of manly courage which pervades the whole. This, of course, affords unity — a unity increased by his doctrine and practice of the minimum level of style in poetical narrative. This minimum level is the ordinary level of speech, plus compression, rhyme, and rhythm, and from it the style may rise in greater or lesser flights. Thus some heroic episode may call emotionally for diction and figure raising it to a height far above the minimum level of the poem as a whole, or a piece of description may rise in a lesser degree. But every part is of the whole, and every line and incident and canto fit schematically into a preconceived design. Nor are the rhythms in the least haphazard. Mr. Neihardt has a very definite theory of "rhythmic progression" in which the variations of short and long rhythms are definitely and progressively grouped.

It will be noticed that all these devices of versification technique — mood, minimum level, and rhythmic progression — serve to bind the epic together into a unified whole. Add, then, the art of the story-teller, and the result brings a verdict from the average reader that the poem is as interesting as a novel, and too absorbing to

abandon till the very end. "Even as a story," wrote one reviewer, "the work moves us as we have seldom been moved by a prose romance." But there is a further reason for this unity, this unusually strong continuity, to be found in the versification. It is the use of rhyme. Tradition would, of course, dictate unrhymed pentameters for epic use, but here is Mr. Neihardt resuscitating the couplet and using it successfully for narrative. Yet is it really the couplet? Certainly not the couplet that Pope employed in narrative and essay, end-stopped and self-contained. The rhythms are those of blank verse; the caesurae are Miltonic. The lines run over. The rhyme unites sentences, paragraph divisions, and even cantos. Besides this unifying function, the rhyme has, of course, its tone-color value. Rhymes are instinctive with Mr. Neihardt. There are no forced or imperfect rhymes in his work.

Mr. Neihardt is not the man to follow tradition as respects rhyme or anything else merely because it is tradition. He is no worshipper at the shrine of the old. He might perhaps have been led away with the vers librists if he had not acquired such a passion for the objective, and such a vision of the objective in epic dress. The surpassing importance of the objective in art is a favorite theme with him. It fits in well with his philosophy of life — though surely a certain measure of subjectivity inserts itself willy-nilly into any work of art. Neihardt is Neihardt, in his work as out of it. But, radical and iconoclast though he may be in some respects, he has little patience with fads in verse.

There are signs of a coming recognition of Neihardt's poetry that shall be both wide and deep. A school edition of "Hugh Glass" has been issued, and it has now gone to its second printing. Professor Julius T. House has written a book about his friend Neihardt. Neihardt clubs have sprung up over the country, especially in the Missouri River country and in California. The legisla-

ture of Nebraska last year turned aside from economic problems to formally name him "Poet Laureate of Nebraska" — a unique honor in which the legislature honored itself as much as the poet; and, finally, they have heard about him in Bancroft.

Oh, of course, they always knew John Neihardt, the agent's assistant — a queer duck that wrote verses. But last year "The Song of Hugh Glass" was adopted for use in the Bancroft schools, and now they are beginning to learn of John G. Neihardt the poet.

It was a blistering hot day when I was in Bancroft, and on my way to the station I stopped at a soft drink emporium that had not always been a soft drink emporium. The only person in sight was a good-looking young man over in one corner reading. I leaned against the bar and waited. Finally, seeing no indication that I was going to be served before my train was due, I spoke to the young man after this fashion:

"I'm sorry to disturb you, my friend, but I should really like a glass of something."

With satisfactory apologies the young man hastened to wait on me, carrying his book under his arm meanwhile.

"Do you happen to know John Neihardt?" I queried as he poured.

"Sure."

"What kind of fellow is he?"

"All right; writes books. I was just readin' one as you came in. 'Song of Hugh Glass' is the name of it. It's pretty good even if it is poetry."

Don't tell me a prophet is without honor in his home town when the very soda clerks won't wait on you because they are so immersed in his poems!

It is a sign.

## DEFENSE

By GRACIA POPE WOOD

A gray road dusty under a cruel sun,  
Unpainted houses and a fence undone,  
People who talk of muslin and lard —  
Against these hurts I wear an armour hard.  
I need not fear their ache can stifle me,  
With white sails on it I have known the sea!

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## SUMMER NIGHTWINDS

By LAURA LANDIS LAEDLEIN

In the infinite the winds are born,  
Where the night is lost, and day not known,  
And they gather their godlike magic there,  
And their wild, other-world tone.

From out of the depths of unlied space  
They are drawn and folded and flung unfurled,  
And only their warm and quivering tip  
Touches the distant world, —

The earth is dim in its dreaming sleep,  
The stars are faint and the still moon white,  
But the wild live winds of secret space  
Sing aloud in the night.



### THREE MIDLAND POETS

By JOHN T. FREDERICK

Of the many books of poems published during the last year, three especially are the work of writers who have been so closely associated with THE MIDLAND project since its inception as to make me feel justified in grouping them together under the term "Midland Poets". Florence Kilpatrick Mixter, Hartley Burr Alexander, and Glenn Ward Dresbach have not only contributed many times to the pages of this magazine, but have helped it in other ways almost equally important. Mr. Alexander has been an associate editor of THE MIDLAND since its foundation, and his good judgment has been depended upon in many matters of policy, both incidental and general; while Mrs. Mixter and Mr. Dresbach have been always among the friends most confidently appealed to in times of perplexity and discouragement. It is, therefore, with a feeling of the most friendly pride in their achievement that I take this belated opportunity to direct attention to the recent books of these writers.

"Out of Mist", Mrs. Mixter's first volume of poems, was published by Boni and Liveright. It consists in part of a remarkable sonnet sequence which gives its name to the volume, and in part of collected lyrics. As I reread the book, I am impressed once more by what seems to me the outstanding quality of Mrs. Mixter's work. This is a certain quiet sureness, resulting from complete realization of the effect desired and complete adequacy in the means employed. This quality is especially noteworthy in the sonnet sequence, where is steadily triumphant progression to an emotional climax of great beauty. But personally I like Mrs. Mixter best in the lyrics, in which the occasional mood, the unified emotion, are expressed with charm and precision. Altogether the volume seems to me to possess genuine distinction. It is at once an achievement and a promise.

Mr. Alexander's "Odes and Lyrics" (Marshall Jones)

is welcomed first of all because it makes available once more his fine "Odes on the Generations of Man", published in a slender volume some years ago and now for some time out of print. These thoughtful and eloquent poems show that the ode is a valid form for modern use whenever a poet of Mr. Alexander's capacities undertakes to use it. Unfortunately this is not a frequent occurrence. So far as I know, there is no parallel within two decades of American poetry to Mr. Alexander's achievement in the "Odes on the Generations of Man". Among the lyrics which form the second and larger part of Mr. Alexander's book are several which are already familiar to readers of past volumes of *THE MIDLAND*. These range from the profound emotion of "A la belle France" to the tender holiday mood of "King Christmas". Altogether, "Odes and Lyrics" is a book which will deserve and reward readers of discernment. Incidentally, it is exceptionally beautiful in form.

Glenn Ward Dresbach's work has been so fully represented in successive volumes of *THE MIDLAND* that it needs no introduction to any but our newest readers. I feel that "In Colors of the West" (published by Henry Holt), Mr. Dresbach's latest book, marks genuine advance in his mastery of his art. It is pleasant to note that recognition has to some extent rewarded his achievement. Mr. Dresbach is now regarded not only as the foremost poetic interpreter of his adopted region, the nearer Southwest, but also as one in the first rank of the younger American poets. His advance is so consistent, so exclusively an expression of the inmost character and aspiration of the man, that I have complete confidence in his continued growth. He will continue to earn and merit what he wins. I hope and believe that he will win high things.

In later issues of *THE MIDLAND* I hope to write further in this informal way of the published books of members of *THE MIDLAND* circle. Perhaps some readers of the magazine may find their way in this way to books they would be sorry to miss.

## THERE

By MAHLON LEONARD FISHER

One elm is dead of all the many, one  
Who knew its ended splendor is dead too.  
(And is there not a hidden door wherethrough  
The ghosts of them may know returning? . . . None?)  
The broad uneven lawn is in the sun;  
And some will pause along the walks to see  
The lifted cool green fountain of a tree  
Wetting eternal winds. Within is spun  
The tenuous web of stillness. Ah, within,  
Among the old and ageless, I have dreamed,  
As men will dream, through midnights when it seemed  
The world was but a whisper that is thin,—  
And of the world would neither know nor care. . . .  
And many of my tears have fallen there.

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### CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

The critical articles in this number are contributed by Nelson Antrim Crawford and Frank Luther Mott, associate editors of *THE MIDLAND*, and by George Carver, a previous contributor of fiction and criticism. Of the poets represented, Laura Landis Laedlein of Williamsport, Pa., and Gracia Pope Wood of New York City appear in *THE MIDLAND* for the first time. Miss Haste of Billings, Mont., and Mr. Fisher of Williamsport, Pa., are well known to readers of this magazine.

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Sworn to and subscribed before me this eighth day of November, 1922.  
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